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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 COLOMBO 001867

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, INR/NESA  
NSC FOR E. MILLARD  
DEPARTMENT PLEASE ALSO PASS TOPEC

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10-30-13

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [CE](#) [NO](#)

SUBJECT: President Kumaratunga lashes out -- and reinforces her reputation for volatility

Refs: (A) Colombo 1861 (D) Colombo 1684

- (B) Singapore 3893 (E) Colombo 1642  
- (C) Colombo 1754 (F) Colombo 1615

(U) Classified by Charge' d'Affaires James F. Entwistle.  
Reasons 1.5 (b, d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: An in-depth review of President Kumaratunga's behavior over the past several weeks shows her lashing out in numerous ways. The main subject of her broadsides continues to be her cohabitation rival, the Prime Minister, but she also hit out at a slew of targets during a recent visit to Singapore. In addition, Tamils have recently taken a hit, as have the Norwegian-led monitors. If there is a method here, the President seems intent on ramping up the pressure in order to undermine the GSL, but her means of doing so are reinforcing her reputation for volatility and unpredictability. The net result is that the prospects for improved cohabitation between the President and the Prime Minister are very poor. END SUMMARY.

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President Hits out at PM  
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2. (C) Over the past several weeks, President Kumaratunga has lashed out at numerous targets. The main subject of her broadsides has been her cohabitation rival, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. The latest round of cohabitation jousting between the two began in mid-September when the President sent a letter to the PM asserting that the GSL was not taking Tamil Tiger military positioning around Trincomalee harbor seriously enough (see Ref F). In the letter's conclusion, the President caustically informed the Prime Minister that he should "refrain from concealing and distorting the truth regarding the security situation in Trincomalee" and "avoid all further acts of omission and commission that would compromise the security and sovereignty of Sri Lanka." The letter was leaked to the press and received widespread publicity.

3. (C) The cohabitation dustup only intensified on September 18 when the Prime Minister responded to the President's letter (see Ref E). While his letter was not as harsh in tone as hers, the PM strongly defended his record on security issues and criticized the President for discussing security issues in public. This provoked another letter from the President dated October 6 (see Ref D). In this letter, the President was again highly caustic, calling the PM's comments on the security situation "evasive." It closed by advising the PM "to attempt seriously, if it is at all possible, to put the country before self and the desire to remain in power at any cost." As far as Mission knows, the Prime Minister has not bothered to respond to the President's October 6 letter.

4. (C) In her most recent public attack on the PM and his government, Kumaratunga targeted C. Mahendran, Sri Lanka's Permanent Representative at the UN. The form the attack took was again a letter that was made public. In it, the President threatened to fire Mahendran, asserting that he had deliberately scheduled the PM -- as opposed to the President -- to speak at this year's UNGA. It is not known whether Mahendran has responded to this letter.

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Harsh Sounds in Singapore  
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5. (C) Kumaratunga also hit out at a slew of targets during a recent visit to Singapore:

-- Kumaratunga gave a speech on October 14 at the World Economic Forum in which she criticized developed nations, stating, in part: "We do not comprehend how rich nations demand of us to abandon to the whims of the

global markets vulnerable sectors of our society when they practice extensive protectionist policies in their own countries." The speech received considerable local publicity and was contrasted with the cooperative approach of the Sri Lankan delegation at the recent World Trade Organization meeting in Cancun. In the face of domestic criticism of the speech, the president's advisers later backpedaled a bit, asserting that she was not speaking out against bilateral or regional free trade agreements.

-- While in Singapore the President also gave an interview, which was published in the October 15 edition of the "International Herald Tribune." In the interview, Kumaratunga criticized the government's peace initiative, asserting that the Tamil Tigers were taking advantage of the process. She also threatened the PM's government, stating: "Under our constitution, the Prime Minister is only a glorified minister. All it takes is a one sentence letter from me to dismiss him and his entire cabinet." Kumaratunga's interview sparked considerable controversy back in Sri Lanka, where business executives and editorials complained that the President was making Sri Lanka look politically unstable to the rest of the international community just as it was poised to recover lost economic ground.

-- Finally, according to her Singapore government hosts, President Kumaratunga also came off as quite difficult to handle during the visit (see Ref B). She expressed disappointment with her schedule and asserted that she had not been received with full ceremonial honors. Singapore officials were also taken aback by her bitterness toward Prime Minister Wickremesinghe.

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Tamil take a Blow  
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16. (C) Tamils have also taken a blow from Kumaratunga. The controversy involved a rally that the President's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), the key constituent element in her People's Alliance (PA) grouping, had scheduled for October 24. Tamils complained that the SLFP rally was taking place the same day as Diwali, a major Hindu holiday, and asked that it be rescheduled for another date. The President refused and the rally went forward. Although there were no reported problems associated with the rally, Tamils were extremely angry with the President for not honoring their request, which they felt was a sign of disrespect. In fact, one Tamil PA MP in her party was so angry that he threatened to bolt to the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) before calming down and returning to the PA.

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Norwegian Chief Monitor Targeted  
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17. (C) In recent days, the President has also taken on the Norwegian-led Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) (see Ref A). After weeks in which members of her party had stepped up criticism of the Norwegian government's facilitation effort, the President struck on October 23, sending a letter to the GoN demanding the removal of SLMM chief Trygve Tellefsen. In her letter, Kumaratunga asserted that Tellefsen was biased toward the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), citing an October 16 incident in which a SLMM official had contacted the Tigers about a purported LTTE arms resupply ship operating off the northeast coast. The Norwegian government, playing for time, has sent the President a placeholder response emphasizing that Norway is looking into the matter.

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Ramping Up the Pressure  
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18. (C) In explaining all of these abrasive steps, contacts have told Mission that they believe President Kumaratunga is trying to up the pressure on the Prime Minister's government dramatically. In an October 29 meeting with polchief, Taranjit Sandhu, the Indian High Commission polcouns, said he believed that Kumaratunga was trying to press whatever buttons she could to pry some MPs away from the PM's fragile coalition in Parliament so that it would fall. Sandhu remarked that he thought the President was misled if she thought she could do this because he thought the PM was "stronger than ever" and would win parliamentary elections if the President called them. Essentially agreeing with Sandhu, Kethesh Loganathan, an analyst at the Center for Policy Alternatives, a local think-tank, told polchief on October 16 that he assumed that the President was "trying to bring on the heat" ahead of the upcoming mid-November budget debate, which "for any government is

always a tricky time." Loganathan said he really did not see how the President's recent moves had improved her positioning vis-a-vis the government, however, as her actions were "not well aimed, nor well considered."

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COMMENT  
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19. (C) As noted, the method in Kumaratunga's seeming madness appears to be an effort to undermine the PM's government in coming months. If that is true, Kumaratunga does not seem to be helping her case, and we agree with Sandhu and Loganathan that she is losing the popularity battle with the PM at this point. We suspect the President is also irked by the PM's successful visit to India last week and his Oval Office meeting next week (an honor she has long sought).

10. (C) Moreover, her recent activities are reinforcing her reputation for volatile and unpredictable behavior, making her position even more difficult. Observers say that while she was always mercurial that trait has gotten worse since the LTTE's failed attempt to assassinate her in December 1999 (she lost an eye in the bomb attack). The President's behavior has fluctuated since the attack, but has generally veered toward vitriolic, hard-edged attacks on those who somehow displease her. This trend is only getting worse. That said, she can have good days. For example, her conversation with Ambassador Lunstead after credentials presentation last month went well, as the President was gracious and cordial, though her bitterness toward the government and the LTTE was clear (see Ref D). (The President was also a charming host at a farewell dinner for the Japanese Ambassador earlier this week, even keeping a smile on her face when the departing envoy sang several of his favorite Sinhalese ballads.) Overall, however, signs for cohabitation are very poor if the President does not adjust her behavior. Kumaratunga's current mindset would make it very hard for the PM to work with her, even if he could be convinced to reach out. END COMMENT.

11. (U) Minimize considered.

ENTWISTLE